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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [EALD](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#) [NO](#) [TH](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Reviewing recent talks, Norwegian envoy upbeat,
but stresses that process still has long way to go

Refs: (A) Bangkok 7737

- (B) Colombo 2064, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills.

Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In a November 4 meeting with Ambassador Wills, Norwegian Ambassador Westborg was upbeat about the recently concluded second session of GSL-LTTE talks, but stressed that the process still had a long way to go. He took note of the LTTE's apparent downgrading of its long-standing demand for an "interim administration" and the group's willingness to participate in a sub-committee on political issues. He confirmed that the sub-committee on humanitarian issues would be a decision-making body. Westborg hoped that Muslim-LTTE relations would improve due to the talks and he provided insights on LTTE dynamics. Unlike some of the effusive press coverage, Westborg's review was sober and we thought it hit the mark. END SUMMARY.

Westborg: Upbeat but Cautious

2. (C) Ambassador Wills, accompanied by polchief, met late November 4 with Norwegian Ambassador Jon Westborg, a member of the GON peace facilitation team at the just-concluded second session of talks held between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). (Note: The talks took place October 31 - November 3 at a hotel outside of Bangkok -- See Reftels.) Westborg was upbeat about the outcome of the talks. "The two sides accomplished many small things, which added up to a lot," he commented. These accomplishments had been achieved despite two "torpedoes" that could have broken up the talks. First, the LTTE side did not let a Colombo court's recent conviction in absentia of its leader, V. Prabhakaran, of involvement in a 1996 terror attack disrupt the talks (see Ref B). Second, the LTTE reacted calmly to the news that six of its cadre had been arrested carrying arms off the eastern coast on November 1.

3. (C) Despite the positive outcome of the talks, Westborg stressed that it was important not to get carried away. Some of the press coverage had been too effusive in asserting, for example, that the talks had led to a "breakthrough" for the peace process. "The process still has a very long way to go and everyone should realize that," Westborg underlined. Caution in these type of situations was important, as many things could happen. The Ambassador noted that he appreciated Westborg's sober assessment, adding that Norway deserved congratulations for keeping the process together and increasing its momentum.

"Interim Administration," Political Sub-Committee

4. (C) Asked for other insights into the talks, Westborg replied that it was important not to overlook LTTE senior negotiator Anton Balasingham's comment that the group "may or may not" support formation of an "interim administration" for the north and east. (Note: See Ref B Para 4 for the text of Balasingham's remark, which was made at the November 3 press conference concluding the talks.) The peace track has had its ups-and-downs over the years, but one constant has been the LTTE's demand for the setting up of an interim administration to be followed down the road by a final settlement, he noted. While not foreclosing on that demand, Balasingham's comment called it into question. In doing this, Westborg related, the LTTE seemed to be acknowledging that the whole issue of an interim administration had become more trouble than it might be worth. There was serious opposition in the south to the notion that the GSL would turn over the north and east to an administration effectively controlled by the LTTE.

In addition, Westborg commented, the LTTE was probably becoming worried that if it was given control of an interim administration it would actually have to govern. The group probably realized that this would be difficult to do, especially in areas it was not in total armed control of, and it did not want to be called to account.

15. (C) The LTTE's apparent downgrading of the need for an interim administration was matched in importance by its acceptance of the idea of forming a sub-committee on political matters, Westborg remarked. (Note: At the talks, the GSL and the LTTE agreed to set up three sub-committees focused on political, humanitarian and de-escalation issues -- See Reftels.) What was especially important about this sub-committee's ambit, he continued, was that it would reach for "broad political understandings." The sub-committee also could meet at any time the parties wanted it to, not only at plenary sessions of the talks.

16. (C) In the short-term, Westborg allowed, the formation of the sub-committee would also undercut President Kumaratunga's public assertion that the talks were not dealing with "core" issues. (Note: FYI: Westborg said he planned to brief Kumaratunga on the talks on November 5.) This was an advantage for the government. In the longer term, the political sub-committee could also be the forum where the LTTE and GSL tackle tough issues related to managing the north and east until a final settlement is reached, particularly if the idea of forming an interim administration is dropped.

17. (C) In reference to "core" issues, the Ambassador asked whether the issue of decommissioning of LTTE weapons had been raised. Westborg replied that it had not, but he acknowledged that it was an issue that would have to be addressed in the future. Ambassador Wills agreed, noting that the idea that the LTTE might maintain an army and a navy would be controversial, indeed unacceptable, in the south. It would be understandable if the group wanted to have a police force, but a military force would add an element of unpredictability that would prove tough to digest. The Ambassador added that any notion that the Sri Lankan security forces would completely withdraw from the north and east, as some pro-LTTE Tamils were advocating, was also a non-starter.

Review of Humanitarian Sub-Committee

18. (C) Shifting focus, Westborg also reviewed what the two sides had agreed to regarding the "Immediate Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Needs in the North and East" Sub-Committee. He underscored that this sub-committee had replaced the "joint task force" ("JTF") idea (which had been agreed to at the first session of talks in mid-September). The humanitarian sub-committee would deal with the same issues as the "JTF," however. It would be a joint government-LTTE "decision-making body" for prioritizing and disbursing assistance to the north and east, he stated. What was slightly different was that the sub-committee was part and parcel of the peace talks, and not some quasi-independent body, which was what the "JTF" was being made out to be by some critics. The sub-committee would report to the Sri Lankan prime minister and the LTTE, but would not require parliamentary oversight.

19. (C) The Ambassador noted that the U.S. had not yet made up its mind about the new sub-committee. Because of the LTTE's involvement, we reserved judgment at this time, he noted. Westborg replied that he understood that, but wanted to stress that the sub-committee would be focused on "helping the people of the north and east." If it was backed by donors and was successful, the sub-committee could reinforce the ceasefire and help the peace process gain traction. In addition, via its participation in the sub-committee, the LTTE would be obliged to respect human rights norms, and be otherwise accountable to the populace in the north and east. The Ambassador replied that he appreciated that explanation, but the U.S. would have to study the issue further.

Muslim/LTTE Ties

110. (C) Questioned about LTTE-Muslim relations, Westborg said he hoped that the situation would improve due to the talks. The LTTE and Rauf Hakeem, a senior minister and the Muslim representative on the GSL team, had agreed to consult closely and to energize local "peace committees" focused on ironing out problems. The

LTTE had made the right noises about wanting to work with the Muslim community. That said, Westborg continued, it was still unclear whether Hakeem really had control of Muslim opinion or whether he remained in danger of being sidelined by radicals within his own party. It was important that Hakeem rise to the occasion and begin to articulate his views better to Muslims in the east. There was a lot of distrust toward Hakeem, however, with many in the east seeing him as an outsider. (Note: Hakeem is not from the east -- see below.) In an effort to assist Hakeem, Westborg said he planned to brief eastern Muslims on the results of the talks soon.

11. (C) (((Note: In a brief story highlighting Hakeem's apparent lack of understanding of the east, Westborg related the following: Karuna, the LTTE military commander in the east, had mentioned at the talks the group's intent to return to Muslims their farmland in the east. Hakeem had not picked up on the importance of this pledge, however, and had to have it pointed out to him. Westborg explained that to Hakeem the issue of Muslims and land did not click, as he was from Kandy and Colombo where Muslims were mostly involved in trade and the professions. In the east, however, a good percentage of Muslims owned farmland, but Hakeem did not seem to realize this. End Note.)))

LTTE Dynamics

12. (C) Queried about the dynamics of the LTTE delegation at the talks, Westborg said it was clear that S.P. Thamilselvan, the chief of the LTTE's political wing, was an important player. Thamilselvan was clearly very close to Prabhakaran and felt comfortable taking decisions on some issues. That was not the case with Balasingham, the ostensible leader of the delegation, who felt compelled to refer all issues, even small ones, back to the Wanni (the LTTE-controlled area in northern Sri Lanka). As for Karuna, Westborg said he was clearly important in the east, but he was not a key LTTE player on overall political strategy.

13. (C) With respect to Prabhakaran, Westborg said he was not sure what made him tick, but the LTTE seemed to be edging closer than ever to supporting autonomy within Sri Lanka and not separatism. In agreeing to move along the peace track, Prabhakaran seemingly was reacting to pressure from his supporters, both those at home and abroad. Politics was complicated in the Wanni and Westerners made a mistake in thinking that Prabhakaran was all-powerful simply because of his brutal record. He was more like an "Oriental potentate," who was obliged to work in sophisticated, cunning fashion to gain support from often competing groups. Asked what Prabhakaran might do in case peace was achieved, Westborg replied that he would probably "go into reserve," i.e., he would not be the public face of the Tigers. Instead, he might pull the strings from behind the scene as Mao did for much of his rule in China.

COMMENT

14. (C) Unlike some of the effusive press coverage, Westborg's review was sober and we thought it hit the mark. The talks have made solid progress, but there have only been two full plenaries. There is still plenty of room for disagreement between the two sides on a slew of make-or-break issues. We expect that much of the give-and-take will now be channeled into the various sub-committees. That, however, would be a real accomplishment in and of itself because the Norwegians have clearly convinced both sides to buy into a process. Westborg noted that the process has not yet suffered any major reverses. With the peace process taking on a life of its own, however, serious bumps in the road just may be controllable as disagreements are channeled into the sub-committees or elsewhere. All of this argues for the likely viability of the peace process into the near-term. Nonetheless, even Westborg -- who has as much experience as any outsider in dealing with the LTTE -- still cannot say for sure what the group's long-term intentions are. END COMMENT.

15. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS